Utterances

Composing a Care-Informed Research Practice in the Cracks

Introduction: Composing a Care-Informed Artistic Research Practice in the Cracks

The Promiscuous Care Study Group

This collectively authored text was created from different harvesting moments among members of the Promiscuous Care Study Group and with the editorial guidance of HumDrumPress. This publication is a companion to the publication Promiscuous Infrastructures: Practicing Care. *Both publications are research outcomes of the Promiscuous Care Study Group.*

Checking In

Utterances: Composing a Care-Informed Artistic Research Practice in the Cracks is a humble offering towards an alternative research practice that is guided by an ethics of care. It is an offering coaxed out of the side notes and the whispers of the Promiscuous Care Study Group, a collective formed within the cracks of the Willem de Kooning (art and design) Academy in Rotterdam.

Gathering under the aegis of study as a site of collective inquiry, and situating our own

collective care practice within a genealogy of artistic and general social practice, the Promiscuous Care Study Group emerged from a shared interest in practising expanded structures of care. At the onset of the project in fall 2021, 18 months into the Covid pandemic, we were consumed with thinking about care infrastructures within the uncertain, precarious, and catastrophic experiences within our working environments, our personal lives, and the world beyond our own parameters where care fatigue was becoming ever prevalent. One could even say that the academy that hosted our group created the conditions that required it, through its felt absence of a caring infrastructure.

The [infra]structures of composition

The idea and need to form the Promiscuous Care Study Group arose from the affective reality all of the members were experiencing within an institution that talks-a-good-talk about care but doesn't necessarily walk-the-good-walk around care.

As a group, we wanted to understand the conditions within which we worked, and

potentially find alternatives for creating a more caring infrastructure. We sought things—practices, alternative pathways and lines of inquiry, ways to think together, to become unstuck—that we could bring back into our direct exchanges with colleagues, into our interactions with students, elements that could truly permeate the walls of the institution and beyond. Our research was budgeted through the academy, yet we carved out a space that was autonomous and independent within this financial framework.

Those who participated in the research held various positions and performed differing roles within the institution: teachers, students, professors, and researchers. As such, those who joined were on unequal footing in terms of time and work capacity, allocated paid research hours, and financial remuneration. It is therefore important here to make transparent the structural inequalities within the educational institution hosting the research, and the unavoidable, direct impact this has on such a project, even one that adopted a shared or collaborative approach. With this in mind, we tried our best to compensate for such inequalities by introducing a series of practices that acknowledged and worked with the conditions at hand; to provide a responsive

infrastructure within the larger structures of the institution. These practices included: redistributing resources to younger colleagues who were at earlier phases in their careers (such as recently graduated students), ensuring meetings were non-mandatory, stopping and making time to recalibrate when the working conditions were considered too exploitative, being attentive to the accountability of the research, especially when it felt it was becoming too extractive, and preparing group agreements at the onset of the research which were open to revision at any point along the way.

The Check in: As an invitation, as structure, as reality, as dialogue

In the early phases of the research, one member of our study group proposed that we begin each meeting with a check in. Towards the beginning of the process, the check in was meant as a temporary pause and a means for taking a breath in between the demands of the hectic schedule of institutional, as well as private, life. Though at first broached tentatively, the check ins soon became essential and, on some occasions, filled the entire two-hour meeting space. They became an established

and integral part of our working together, a space and time to bring in our full selves in and be honest. The background context of our research—Covid, multiple pandemic lockdowns, the visceral experiences of exploitative working conditions, uncertainty, depression and rage, grief and personal loss—were experiences shared. The visible and invisible repercussions of these experiences, their toll on mental and physical health, on the body, on people's energy, and, in general, feelings of stress and being stretched to the limit, filled our meetings and our collective exchanges. We created a sense of safety within the space, a space held for slowness, for nourishment, for attentiveness to bodies, relations and needs, and an interruption in institutional pacing and alienation.

Issues and themes introduced during the check ins ended up guiding the directions we took in the research. Moreover, the check ins invited vulnerability invited vulnerability and opened up a space for being intimately present that resonated in how we chose to write and reflect on our work. The collectively-authored utterances text featured in this book is one example of this. Certain vocabulary, terms, and real, imaginary, metaphorical and theoretical frameworks emerged from long periods of being

together in this communal space and with this generative approach, as a shared practice of meaning making.

Our meetings were spatially fragmented and we related to that fragmentation differently when we were not physically together, in a shared space. Some people had childcare issues, some lived in Rotterdam, others not. We were dealing with Covid, of course, and the aftermath. Several members experienced personal family loss and personal crises. There were burnouts, rampant anxiety, and institutional conflicts. Most of the time we met online, occasionally our meetings took us elsewhere. One day we were in a garden with the sun shining. Another time we found ourselves in a small corner office in the middle of the academy. To get to it, we had to go through a construction site and wiggle through a crawl space. But mostly we met through our screens.

The conditions under which we were meeting were quite extraordinary. We hadn't experienced a pandemic before, especially the proximity of bodies that might be carrying a deadly virus. We never knew for sure who would be coming to each session. There were no guarantees that thoughts, feelings, experiences, or anything else for that matter, would

cohere. Yet somehow there was a certain consistency to our protocol. There was always something that emerged from the meetings that offered an interruption within the institution, allowing us to carry our research as part of a caring infrastructure that facilitated networks of trust. Together these circumstances resisted the assumed standardised format of the institutional logic of productivity.

The Afterlife of the Check In: The emergence of a method

Research of the gut, the heart. Research that you feel. A care-informed artistic research practice begins with the lived experience of the body and the visceral experiences of sharing intimate spaces together. A collective care practice can play a vital role in system transformation. While research that is meaningful and impactful is often measured by visible, public interventions at a macro level, it is equally vital that we tend to the relational and personal at an intimate level. It is by cultivating spaces of interpersonal communication, bringing in our embodied selves, that a shift to power relations at a micro level might manifest.
One way of working does not replace the other;

both are necessary, urgent part the same metabolic entanglement.

What is the point and value of this type of research? We work in an art academy, which is located within a larger university of applied sciences. In the academy, artistic and academic research are constantly in tension: the academic and scientific modes often have more value or are commonly understood as 'doing research'. Therefore despite occupying an environment where artistic practice happens, normative structures and standardizations occur, and are very often implemented from the top down. Our ideas of an art academy and of research differ; we work within an artistic research format that emphasises the flux, the meandering and the emergent. We are gesturing towards a type of artistic research which sits in the cracks of the normative systems, values and structures that do not acknowledge the validity of what we are doing. We offer no promises of marketable skills, no new prototypes or patents, nor immediate discernible results of any measurable valorization or impact.

Put simply, we were working with the guiding principles of "We are going to have a go. Let's see if it works." We tried to make the best use of the limited time and resources we

had, to have conversations that we wanted and needed. This ethos of gathering, conversing, thinking, and creating as an interweaving process worked against the expectations of what is considered valuable in spaces of research. Despite all the pressures and constraints, we created an in-between space of power, of *empowerment*, of solidarity, even for a moment, even just a little.

The check in emerged as a method through and within our practice of doing research together. When we began the collective work, it was not anticipated that this approach was inevitable nor even needed in our ways of coming together, yet it became so. The check in was not the preliminary busywork of establishing a management structure. Its concern was how to build a space of trust, to talk freely and explore vulnerable areas of our research. Our approach made space for collecting impressions, allowing tensions and gaps, speaking and being silent, presence and non-presence, note taking and taking note. All of this was an ongoing process of caring and coalition building.

Breaths, pauses, gaps, and fragments acted as intermediaries and opened new pathways to meaning making that continue to unfold.

As each person spoke, there were simultaneously many people who kept quiet and listened. We acknowledged the requirements and complexities of listening, of being heard, and of understanding our biases, which in turn affect our ability to listen and receive the experience and knowledge that others might have to share. This humbling practice of researching in the cracks is inefficient, indeterminate, meandering, fragmentary and tangential, and we stay within the process, wherever it may lead. To find ourselves, we must get lost together. We always need to learn other ways of being. We always need to learn from others.

Our collective research and utterances represent a kind of fragmentary thinking that can be valued and guided by dynamics and contexts in which we care. The utterances are traces of researching in the cracks of uncertainty and finding a way of meeting each other outside of our practices. This collective pursuit does not provide an explanation of care, where everything that we have been living as well as reading appears balanced in an easily legible cohesion.

Within this humble offering we hope that you may encounter our research as a bodily praxis. We felt it was important to develop an

intimate publication that encompasses our ways of working, the rhythms and the breaks and the intimacy, an ethos of being in '*right relation*'. With respect to right relation, seemingly separate lines of inquiry become interwoven, generate emergent interrelationships, bring together the collective imagination, pursue unpredictable pathways, and honour the marginalia of research by centering the side notes and whispers. Once you embark on this research you begin to realise what is missing, or what you have been missing all along.

This book is a nod to what we experienced. An experience that holds the potential to be reproduced and reactivated through the act of reading, and the ways in which its contents may live on in different contexts, environments, and practices. We therefore invite you to read, embody and reproduce the contents of this publication at your own pace and discretion. Not in exactly the same way, we are certain, or would never be too presumptuous to assume. We hope the check in lives on, grows, evolves, and can be used again and again in times of need, of requirement, or, ultimately, of desire.

How

you?

have a

round,

want to

are

Let's

listening

do you

begin?

How to build a support network?

What are the tools required?

Setting up the environment

I'm not one of those people
who are very good
at asking for things.

It's been a long time
feeling this way.
Right?

I'm interested in the sensorial aesthetic qualities for
building intimacy as a form of practice.
To be suddenly left alone. What are our needs
that should be met in relation
to questions of safety?

We always talk about the sinking ship,
and there are many holes.

How to externalise insecurity
both with work ethics
and individual needs?

Are there any considerations that you would like for us to have in terms of care so that you feel safe in this physical space? Particularly in relation to the current, global pandemic situation.

Let's be specific, the fear of dying alone.

It is important for me to work collectively, both in my practice and personally.

I guess this idea of safety, which I feel lucky to have in my home.

The working environment is so fragile and I end up having to make demands from people who are unwell.

I thought about you a lot over the holidays.

And then where's the safety net?

I'm always amazed by people who know how to ask for support and are already prepared for these moments.

I listen to [redacted] radio every day and they were speaking about Indigenous, collective strategies relating to climate change.

How to build a support network?
What are the tools required?

And for me,
it's such a triumph, to have a family,
to have kids,
to be remembered.

The biggest fear is to be
incapacitated
without any support network.

Patriarchy and what patriarchy does to me on so many levels.

The fear of being alone.

You are well,
until you
are no longer well.

How does that moment of reconnection happen?

The [infra]structure of the environment

I have thought
a lot about
the role of rage
as a constructive force.

On the outside,
these check ins
are really good.

How does one
steal joy and healing?
Interesting survival mechanism.

I was thinking
how nice
it would be
if I can hug you now,
give you another hug.

Involving the sweat and the non-sterile.

Maybe in my stress,
I produce more stress.

What I am taking from this group is the acknowledged space for doubts and insecurities.

It is hard not to be consumed by thinking about care infrastructures when people seem to no longer care.

I'll totally hug you.

I've been thinking a lot about grief and uncertainty in education and realising that there's no space for grief and uncertainty in education.

How does that
moment of
reconnection happen?

Sometimes I think we
just need to be kinder
to ourselves.

Infrastructures
that actually facilitate
networks of
trust.

Where am I?

Stepping into
the structure

Sorry,
I am just making a cup of tea.

I was just thinking
about things like mood and atmosphere.

The sun is so cinematic.

A bunch of tomatoes,
basil, and sunflowers.

Whats happening
there on the train?

It's a good thing that I have become aware once again of body timespace.

I see two orange sweaters.

It is quite nice to have my kitchen in the background,
usually it is just a bookshelf.

Yeah, let's take a break now?

Booze gives you hot flashes in menopause.

Where am I?

My internet is really bad.

The quince blossoms
have blossomed.

These sense-based memories
I seem to have
of the meetings.

Hey,
different
you have a
zoom
background!

And just like we said,

if we are going to go through this, let's go through it together.

The context that surrounds

And finally after a few hours,
I fell asleep but
then woke up completely drenched
in sweat in a way that
I've never been drenched in sweat before.

These past few years
have been central
to this feeling of not
being able to know what to do.

It's a combination
of being excited
to see him yet knowing
he is not well. The proximity of bodies.

I know that we took a risk.

Well,
I'm just wondering
how long this can go on for.
It's been two years now.

I think I optimistically
said, "Let me know if you want
to meet in real life or online,"
and then I was like,
wow, this is really silly.

Yeah, I think
I'm getting back into some sort of a rhythm.

I don't know
if I hate the lockdown.

But we decided
not to isolate
them or isolate ourselves.

I tested positive with Covid.

Yeah,

we were able to
get our booster this week.

He was sick for like five days
and then I got sick,
and then someone else
got sick after that.

[redacted] was really sick.
It was awful.
It was really hard.

Nobody had touched
him for five days. I was with his
family, and he was in
quarantine.

The Covid numbers
are really bad in [redacted].

I almost cancelled. *Not being*
able to breathe at
night and feeling
really freaked out by that.

But I can't even
visit her because of Covid. Where do
you draw the line?

There was this moment where
we could share a room again,
and we could touch each other,
just hold hands and hug.

I mean we all had
Covid after the
holiday break.
We tested positive,
five family members
at home.

And we had some close contact
with it but never actually
tested positive with Covid.
So at this point, I don't know if that's good or not.

To those of us who relate
to contamination or post contamination
or however you want to say it.

The amount
of people who are required
to work while sick.

Mediation in the proximity
to those who are infected.
Even the privilege of
knowing you're infected.

Covid has done
something to the way
that production happens.
The rhythm of things,
the planning around things.

If somebody is not masked, or there are no announcements about what the protocols are before a meeting, there's so many different assumptions about how to meet, yet without any meaningful conversation about it.

And just like we said, if we're going to go through this, let's go through it together.

I dont want to step into other peoples check in time.

I also want to say I felt incredibly relieved once I finally tested positive with Covid.

And at that point, I just said, like, I'm sorry, like, I'm not doing that, you know, I'm still breastfeeding.

I'm having total memory blanks.
Does Covid cause memory loss?
It's totally freaking me out.

It's just the strangeness
of distance and not knowing what to do.

Pandemic and the loss of
tactility
and the loss of
relation through touch.

How am I doing?

The check in:
as method, as
structure, as
dialogue, as reality

Yes.

How am I doing?

This feeling of
vulnerability,
of not being in control,
really, but what
does it mean to be in control?

How am I doing?
I just have a big knot in my stomach.

Even basic things
like planning for the next day
is a bit confusing.

I'm *kind* of in a liminal state.

I get easily
typecast
as 'a mum' who has
nothing more to offer
and therefore gets passed
over which
I also find very frustrating.

I'm struggling with a lot of
feelings at the moment,
especially about work.
The place I work.
Being out of work.

I don't know
how to prioritise
any more urgencies.

I feel terrified
about how people
have come back to the 'usual'.
There is no transition.

And yeah,

there are a
range of emotions.

I am finding it
increasingly hard
to focus on being
in this pandemic moment.

I am definitely
worrying about
various people in my life.

I think I am okay
but in a confused state.

All the transitions
that are happening at work,
I can barely process it.

I have been sitting
a lot with grief.

You should not have to apologise.
Please cry!

It's intense
at the moment.

Sorry to jump
into your check in.

I always feared that I would
be alone,
that I wouldn't have a family.

I am also quite stressed
about the future.

It's been intense,
Fuck.

I tried to do things
last week that
didn't have anything to do with work.

The external terrible news
and feelings of insecurity
is not good for
my general anxiety,
which tends to already be very high.

I'm quite stressed.
And I think everybody
around me is quite stressed.

It's really
confronting being here,
you know?

I'm showing these contradictions.

Makes me aware
of my inconsistencies,
and my limits.
My own contradictions.

A lot of people are burning out.

Now I'm back
in the spiral of YEAH,
contracts are not going
to be renewed.

This is my check in.

I have a lot of feelings
which are transformed into rage.

The institution will always keep you
busy, which keeps you away
from the actual work.

This devastating pool of toxicity.

I think we are all
at breaking point.

It's always such
a pleasure to see you.
I'm happy that you are here.

Hehe, hello [redacted].

I would like to stay
with the check in or deepen
what we are sharing in the check in.

Deepening the check in?

Yes.

What is the intimacy of wind?

The tone
of the space

The words
'care' and
'worrying' are the same.

We know what kinds
of care are needed in the academy
because we are in proxy to it,
but it's hard to see for those
who are outside of it.

The care of my family
is a boundary.

What is the intimacy
of wind?

It's the demonstration
of care and not the
explanation of care.

Take care.

Lament and grief
come into the etymology of care
in English.

What wind
does is produce
comfort
and discomfort
at the same time.

The challenges
we may face

I don't know how you all felt last week, but I've never experienced such stress with the weather, especially when sunny.

And I was thinking in terms of a storm brewing. These intersections of many things that are happening in my life.

It was a haunting feeling even when there was just silence. It's hard not to feel hopeless. Really.

Often the eye of the storm is a moment of calm just before the storm itself.

What wind does is produce
comfort and discomfort
at the same time.

Thinking through
the storm and
the eye of the storm
and what is possible
within the eye of the storm.

And yeah,
the trees were knocked down
behind my house
and there was sun beating on them.

And then the
storm came with
everything kind
of crashing down.

There are always pockets of hope that help make sense and meaning.

The hope filled futures we may encounter

Have a good weekend.

What makes this group
so valuable is
that we speak about
situations that we've seen,
and these situations
have been in so many
different spaces
and places regardless
of the context.

Because then,
when the wind started
coming in,
I looked outside
and it was bright sunshine,
blue sky.

Thanks everybody
and see you soon. Speaking about
sensitive issues.
For example,
the check in.

I love the format
of these conversations.
Many things emerge,
and you evolve,
just through the exchanges.

2022...
let's hope it offers
more levity and grace.

A space for doubts
and insecurities.

Chat saved.
Thank you.

How can one be accountable
without being extractivist?

I don't think
I've had this kind of conversation
in a while either,

and it's really nice
to read it.

Hey,
take care everyone.

Thank you,
and thanks for your openness,
generosity.

I mean, to me,
it also builds intimacy
so you can probably imagine
I'm into that.

Talking with my [redacted] friends.
I feel hopeless but I just don't want
to bring any sort of negativity
into this space.

It's constantly a monologue
in my head.
Don't be too disappointed.

Thanks
everybody
for sharing.

There are always pockets
of hope that help
make sense and meaning.

Make sure you look
at all the buds on the trees
and urge them
to start blooming.
Smell them,
put them in your nose.

Take care.

Bye bye.

Colophon

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Utterances: Composing a Care-Informed Artistic Research Practice in the Cracks is a humble offering towards an alternative artistic research practice that is guided by an ethics of care

Utterances proposes the 'check in' as an invitation, as well as a structure, dialogue, and reality that begins with the lived experience of the body, combined with the visceral experiences of sharing intimate spaces together. This approach opens space for collecting impressions, allowing for tensions and gaps, speaking and being silent, presence and non-presence, note taking and taking note, all as an ongoing process of caring coalition building.

This intimate publication's collective research encompasses a way of working, the rhythms and the breaks of a certain kind of intimacy, and an ethos of being in '*right relation*'. With respect to this research being in right relation, seemingly separate lines of inquiry become interwoven, generate emergent interrelationships, bring together collective imagination, pursue unpredictable pathways, and honour the marginalia of research by centring the side notes and whispers.

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